

Tapes: Nixon Sought Brookings Break-In

Vietnam War Papers Targeted

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President Richard M. Nixon ordered a break-in and theft at the Brookings Institution in June 1971 so he could learn what information the public policy center had collected on the Vietnam War, according to newly released White House tapes.

In a conversation that took place a year before the Watergate break-in that eventually drove him from office, Nixon told Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman to "break into the place, rifle the files, and bring them out."

At one point, with characteristic gruffness and punctuating each word, Nixon said, "You go in to inspect . . . and clean it out."

No evidence has surfaced in the last quarter-century that the late president had advance knowledge of the break-in at Democratic headquarters in the Watergate, and this is the first direct proof he authorized another burglary. No break-in at Brookings was ever reported.

While Nixon's words were made public only this week, in tapes released by the National Archives, his administration's anxiety over leaks concerning U.S. involvement in Vietnam and fear Brookings might have obtained classified papers have been long known. The tapes reveal Nixon feared the liberal-leaning think tank and would go so far as to order a burglary to discover what it had.

The archives log said national security adviser Henry A. Kissinger, Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird and

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Attorney General John N. Mitchell were also in the room. Mitchell has since died, and Kissinger and Laird denied knowledge of any break-in talk yesterday.

"I have absolutely no recollection of any such conversation," Kissinger said in a statement relayed by an assistant. "I seriously doubt that I was ever in the room when such a conversation took place. Even if I had been there earlier, I would have left the room once I had completed whatever I had needed to discuss with the president."

Laird said he does not recall Nixon talking about a break-in at Brookings. "I don't think Haldeman would have carried it out," Laird said. "I think it just sounds like he [Nixon]

was a little upset."

Nixon gave the order on June 30, 1971, the day the Supreme Court rejected the administration's request to block continued publication of the Pentagon Papers. Haldeman, writing in his now-published diaries, said the president and top aides believed that June day that a conspiracy existed among people who wanted to make public Vietnam War documents. Haldeman died in 1993.

"There's a general agreement that there is very definitely a conspiracy here, on these [Pentagon] papers, and Laird alluded to some intelligence they had that he didn't get into detail on," Haldeman's June 30 entry says.

The Senate Watergate Committee report detailed the White House's concern that Brookings was planning a study based on Vietnam papers similar to those that had been leaked to the New York Times and Washington Post. The panel took testimony that Nixon aide Charles W. Colson planned to firebomb the building and steal documents, an allegation Colson denied.

Nixon's comments are part of 201 hours of White House tapes made public Monday. The references to the Brookings break-in were first reported by the San Francisco Examiner yesterday.

"They have a lot of material," Nixon told Haldeman, referring to Brookings. "I want, the way I want that handled, Bob, is get it over. . . . I want Brookings [sic], just break in, break in and take it out. You understand?"

Haldeman responded, "Yeah, but you've got to have somebody to do it."

Nixon: "Well, you, that's what I'm just telling you. Now don't discuss it here. . . ."

After a few broken sentences, Nixon said: "You're to break into the place, rifle the files and bring them out."

"I don't have any problem with breaking in," Haldeman said.

Nixon cut him off: "Just go in and take them. Go in around 8 or 9 o'clock. . . . That's right. You go in and inspect . . . and clean it out."

A few days after the Times began publishing the Pentagon Papers on June 13, Nixon approved creation of an investigative unit in the White House, known as "the Plumbers," to run political and national security probes. The president later de-

scribed their purpose as stopping leaks and investigating sensitive security matters. But the group would gain notoriety for covert operations such as the September 1971 break-in at the office of former Pentagon official Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. Ellsberg had leaked the classified Pentagon Papers to the Times.

Stanley N. Wellborn, Brookings public affairs director, said yesterday, "The atmosphere in Washington in the early '70s was such that all sorts of organizations became suspect. . . . There were never any Pentagon Papers here. And there was never any break-in or firebombing. So much of this story is laced with hyperbole."

Morton H. Halperin and Leslie Gelb, who were friends of Ellsberg and at Brookings at the time, both said yesterday Brookings never had a copy of the Vietnam documents.

Staff researcher Barbara J. Saffir contributed to this report.
